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UNITED NATIONS REFORM: MEASURES AND PROPOSALS

Letter dated 10 November 1997 from the Secretary-General to the President of the General Assembly

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the statement I delivered on 4 November 1997 to the open-ended informal consultations of the plenary on agenda item 157.

I should be grateful if you would have the statement circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 157.

(Signed) Kofi ANNAN
Secretary-General

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SECRETARY-GENERAL'S STATEMENT TO THE OPEN-ENDED INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS OF THE PLENARY ON AGENDA ITEM 157

(United Nations reform: measures and proposals)

Tuesday, 4 November 1997

I am pleased to be here today to join these open-ended informal consultations as you approach closure on the first step of your important task. Member States have been discussing my report "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" [A/51/950] for some six weeks now. Once these consultations began, my representatives kept me informed on a daily basis of the course of your deliberations. Under my direction, they have responded in detail and at length to the many comments you have made and queries you have raised about various aspects of the report, in particular with regard to the actions being undertaken under my responsibility.

In addition, the Secretariat has now issued five conference room papers in order to provide further information on the actions and recommendations contained in the report. The answers provided by the Secretariat together with the conference room papers constitute elaborations of my measures and proposals and should be considered together with the report.

I welcome the interest that Member States have shown in reviewing the various sections of the report. It is understandable that there has been a wish to obtain amplification on actions and recommendations that are varied and, in some cases, novel and complex. I trust, however, that after weeks of detailed discussions, Member States are now ready to proceed to effective decisions.

Let us remember that the report before you has its origin in the widespread call for reform that was repeatedly echoed by Heads of State or Government at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of our Organization. In presenting my proposals, I sought to respond to that call while taking full account of previous studies and recommendations as well as the developments of the last two years, including the work of General Assembly working groups and the discussions I have had with the President of the Assembly as well.

It is also worth recalling that my report was presented on 16 July of this year, some three and a half months ago. Since that time, Member States have had amply opportunity to review it in capitals and at missions here in New York. I was encouraged by the very strong positive response given to the report in the general debate of the General Assembly at its current session. There appeared to be broad support for the thrust of my report and the directions outlined therein. In summing up the general debate, the President of the Assembly hailed a major change in perception and attitudes since the fiftieth anniversary session. He reminded us that the United Nations was then under a barrage of harsh and often destructive criticism and pointed out that it was very important not to lose momentum and to translate the high level of political will and commitment demonstrated during the general debate into prompt concrete actions.

That is the challenge facing us today. The question is a simple one: Can the United Nations reform itself? As Secretary-General I do not pretend that I have all the answers to all the problems faced by this Organization. The transformation of the Organization into an institution that is well prepared for the challenges of the twenty-first century is a shared responsibility of the Secretary-General and Member States. And, ultimately, the answer to the question as to whether the United Nations can reform itself must be given by the Member States themselves.

Let us bear in mind that the expectations of international public opinion are high that the United Nations will prove equal to the imperative of reform. In asking that my reform proposals be considered under a new agenda item of the General Assembly and that they be addressed as an interrelated whole I did not do so with the expectation that Member States would approve them without adequate consideration. I fully expected that some of the recommendations would need to be further elaborated and clarified. I recognized too that others might need to be referred to specialized bodies for further consideration. At the same time, I was sufficiently encouraged by the statements in the general debate and the discussions I had with your Heads of State and Government and Foreign Ministers here in New York a number of weeks ago to feel that the bulk of my proposals commanded the support of the membership as a whole.

If there is a need for still further elaboration, we shall provide it. The most recent conference room papers are on the dividend for development and the revolving credit fund. We are prepared to submit additional conference room papers were they to be required. My representatives are also ready to provide Member States with further responses to comments and queries. Having said that, I nevertheless very much hope that this forum will find a way to balance appropriately any remaining desire for more information with the equally important need to take substantive decisions without undue delay.

Let me turn to the 29 actions that I have described in my report. I am undertaking these actions in order to improve the managerial capacity and operational responsiveness of the Secretariat so as to better serve Member States. These actions are directly relevant to my task of managing the Secretariat, and expeditious treatment of them is essential if the momentum of reform is to be sustained. While the actions are within my authority as chief administrative officer, I am, of course, mindful of, and have full respect for, the guidelines laid down by the Medium-term Plan for the period 1998-2001 [A/51/6/Rev.1 and Rev.1/Corr.1], existing legislation on the programmatic content of the work of the substantive entities and the Financial Regulations and Rules of the Organization. These considerations apply to all of my actions. I would note specifically that they apply to my actions on human rights and civil society, where Member States have indicated a number of concerns.

Those aspects of the actions that have budgetary implications have been submitted to the appropriate intergovernmental bodies for their review. In a few cases, the actions have related programmatic implications and these have been reflected in the recommendations that are before Member States for their consideration.

These informal consultations have also been helpful in indicating certain instances where it would be useful to refine our approach during the course of implementation. I shall take full account of the comments made by delegations in this respect and, in particular, the views expressed by the Group of 77 and the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries.

There are some issues on which I believe it would be useful to provide some additional information here today. The first is on my proposal to establish the position of a Deputy Secretary-General. Let me make it clear that it is my intention that the Deputy Secretary-General will be an integral part of my own office and will exercise only such responsibilities and functions as are derived from my own authority and as delegated by me from time to time. In proposing a Deputy Secretary-General, my purpose is to be able to benefit from the support of an official with the rank, stature and capabilities needed to help me to discharge more fully and effectively the responsibilities of my office and not to create another separate layer of decision-making. Thus, I do not plan to create a new structure that would separate me from the senior officials who now report to me; rather I am seeking to facilitate and strengthen my relationship with them and my ability to exercise effective oversight and direction of the Organization through them.

As you will appreciate, my own priorities and the demands upon me will, by the nature of my duties, vary from time to time. I want to be free to utilize the services of the Deputy Secretary-General in a manner that will be most helpful and valuable to me in the exercise of my responsibilities. This is the reason that I chose not to delegate a particular segment of my responsibilities to the Deputy Secretary-General on an ongoing basis. An important example of my reasoning in this respect is my determination to give highest priority to revitalizing the United Nations role in development. Some delegations have suggested that this might best be done by entrusting the Deputy Secretary-General with delegated responsibility for development. But I do not want, nor do I intend, to divest myself of primary responsibility for development, and rather will ask the Deputy Secretary-General as one of her main functions to support and assist me in giving development the primacy of the attention it deserves.

It is because I view the Deputy Secretary-General as an integral part of my own office that I seek the right to make the appointment for a period that would not extend beyond my own term of office.

The second issue I would like to single out is that of disarmament. Disarmament is the only subject that is being dealt with in all three categories of consideration, namely, actions being undertaken under my authority; matters having budgetary implications; and recommendations to Member States. It is clearly a subject of great interest to all Member States, touching as it does on fundamental questions of international peace and security and national sovereignty.

It was in recognition of your interest that the conference room paper on disarmament was one of the first to be produced. I intend to reissue it, along with the other conference room papers, as official addenda to my July report so that they may be given the appropriate status [see A/51/950/Add.1-5]. I have

also decided, in accordance with the earlier recommendation of the General Assembly, to name the new department the "Department of Disarmament Affairs".

On the subject of human rights, my actions in this area have been guided by the principles embodied in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted unanimously at the World Conference on Human Rights. The Declaration recognizes that democracy, development and respect for human rights are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. It calls on all the relevant parts of the Organization and the United Nations system to assess the impact of their strategies and policies on the enjoyment of all human rights. The participation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in all relevant executive committees will serve to advance those principles and goals. It will also help promote the full enjoyment of all human rights, including the right to development, as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights.

Several delegations have asked for clarification on the accreditation of the resident coordinator. My objective is to have effective collaboration among United Nations entities in relation to operational activities for development. That objective would be well served by having one official of a higher status than the others who could present the customary letter of introduction from the Secretary-General to the Head of Government. I believe that this action is consistent with the expressed desire of Member States to enhance the leadership position of the resident coordinator, but the decision on whether to grant the proposed level of accreditation would remain with individual Member States.

Mr. President, I have welcomed this opportunity to appear here today. I know that you have been guiding these deliberations with your customary skill and determination. You, Sir, are helping to make this the "Reform Assembly". I have no doubt that, with your leadership, the General Assembly will soon be in a position to take action on this agenda item. I wish you and the delegations engaged in these consultations success as you continue with your historic mission.